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ABSTRACT

It is important for children to have a safe way to spend time after school and to have the opportunity to bolster the education they receive during class with extra learning activities. This guide provides information about after-school programs so that parents can choose the best one for their children. There are good after-school programs in most urban communities. Excellent programs can be run by schools or community organizations. Program staff usually actively recruit families, but parents should ask agencies and people in the community about all the local programs and they should check them carefully before enrolling students. The best programs offer comprehensive activities that foster the self-worth of each child, help children develop skills, provide homework and study help and opportunities, and provide other opportunities such as sports participation or career information. A parent should look for responsible and caring staff, a safe and clean environment, exciting and challenging activities, and other aspects of a well-run and enjoyable program. Parent involvement in after-school programs is important, and good programs will encourage parents to participate. (SLD)

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A GUIDE TO CHOOSING AN AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM

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It is important for children to have a safe way to spend time after school, and to have the opportunity to bolster the education they receive during class time with extra learning activities. Children whose families aren't home when they return from school face many risks. Younger children may feel fear and worry, fail to eat well or do their homework, and watch too much television. They may even have an accident or be victimized by violence. Adolescents, who may spend their afternoons outside, with friends who also have nothing worthwhile to do, may join gangs or participate in other anti-social behavior, engage in premature sexual activity, or use drugs or alcohol. The risk to adolescents alone in cities is greatest, because there are so many negative influences on the streets. Even siblings who take care of each other may feel stress, and they miss the chance to have enriching group experiences in high quality programs.

This guide provides information about after-school programs so parents can choose the best one for their children.

Types of After-School Programs

Fortunately there are good after-school programs in most urban communities. Some may even be free, the cost of others is usually based on family income, and there may be subsidies or scholarships available. Schools run some programs themselves and others are sponsored by schools or school districts. One advantage of the school location is that children don't have to travel to get there, so there are no safety or financial issues. Another is the availability of good facilities, like a kitchen and gymnasium, and good equipment, like a laboratory and computers. A disadvantage of a school program is that the children may feel like they have just a longer school day instead of a different, exciting experience in the afternoon.

Experienced community organizations, like churches, boys and girls clubs, and "Y"s, also run programs. Public agencies run some programs, but the activities they organize may be limited. So, for example, libraries only operate reading programs and city recreation departments only offer opportunities to participate in sports. Other specialized programs are run by a department of a local college or a professional organization. These may offer, say, only science activities, or a drama club. Less formal programs include those run by day care centers for young children that open their doors to school-age children before- and after-school, and licensed family child care providers. Independent programs may be held where the operator has its headquarters or runs other youth programs, or in a rented or donated space.

How to Find a Program

Since programs need participants to be successful, staff actively recruits families. Parents may receive letters from their children's school, see notices in local newspapers, or pick up a flyer at the super market, health clinic, library, or social service center. Religious and other community leaders may provide information about programs because they believe that children should participate. It is important, though, to ask agencies and people in the community about all the local programs, so that you can choose among all that are available, not just enroll your child in the one that advertises the most.

Programs specifically for adolescents may recruit youth in the community directly by showing them their sports equipment and telling them about other attractive activities and services. You can, then, ask your teenagers if they know about a program, but you should check it out yourself before enrolling them.

Qualities of a Good After-School Program

Programs should offer children the chance to have fun and feel comforted, as well as be excited by learning. Children should look forward to going there. The best programs offer a comprehensive set of activities that do the following:

- Foster the self-worth of each child, and develop the children's self-care skills.
- Develop their personal and interpersonal social skills, and promote respect for cultural diversity. For adolescents, foster an appropriate sense of independence based on their level of maturity, and develop their ability to resist substance use, sexual activity, and other temptations.
- Provide help with homework, tutoring, and other learning activities.
- Provide time and space for quiet study.
- Provide new, developmentally-appropriate enrichment activities to add to students' learning at school, help them develop thinking and problem-solving skills, and spark their curiosity and love of learning.
- Provide recreational and physical activities to develop physical skills and constructively channel children's energy pent up after a day sitting in a classroom.
- Encourage participation in individual sports activities to help youth develop self-esteem by striving for a personal best, and participation in group sports to provide lessons about cooperation and conflict resolution.
- Provide age-appropriate job readiness training.
- Provide information about career and career training options. Offer firsthand experiences with community business leaders and tours of local businesses.

What to Look for in an After-School Program

It is best to visit programs when they are in operation so you can see firsthand what the staff is doing and whether the children seem happy. Besides asking whether the program includes the activities listed above, you can use this checklist to help you decide whether to enroll your children in the program:

- Does the staff consist of responsible and caring adults who really like children and who can provide support and guidance? Is supervision adequate?
- Is the program in a safe and clean environment? Is there enough space for activities and quiet time? Are the rest rooms adequate? Is the space decorated in an inviting way?
- Are nutritional snacks or meals provided?
- Are there good resources, such as a library and sports equipment?

- Do the activities look exciting and challenging? Are they age-appropriate? Are the participants having fun as well as learning?
- Are the activities offered the ones that your children like to do or want to learn?
- Does the program coordinate group and individual learning with the school to be sure that participants benefit as much as possible from attending it?
- Can children come before school and on holidays as well as in the afternoon? Is there an extra fee for that? Is there a late fee if you must pick up your children after the program is over?
- Can children attend only a few times a week instead of every day? Can you pay only for the sessions your children attend? (You may be able to take care of your children yourself some afternoons, or have older children who can sometimes handle care.)
- What are the costs? Are there extra fees for trips, personal tutoring, and lessons?

Parent Participation

Parent involvement in after-school programs is just as important as in other aspects of children's lives. Good programs will ask parents what they want and need, and what their children want to learn and like to do, even before the children enroll.

It is important to keep in touch with the program staff after your children begin participating, to stay informed about how they are doing, and to find out if you can help your children learn more or get greater enjoyment from the program. Since the children in most programs represent many cultures, it is useful for parents to talk to staff about their children's needs, their own child-rearing methods, and their expectations, to prevent conflicts and to help staff better appreciate diversity. By providing information about their culture and family history, parents can help staff offer the children a multicultural education.

Good programs also help parents participate in their children's development and education, by arranging family activities at convenient times, and organizing group sessions with program staff that cover a variety of parenting issues. Children who see their parents become involved in activities sponsored by the after-school program will believe that the program is worth the effort they put into participating in it.

This guide, by Wendy Schwartz, is based on **After-School Programs for Urban Youth**, *a digest published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. Please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Clearinghouse for a copy of the digest and a list of other Clearinghouse publications.*

Other guides to help parents help their children learn can be found on the National Parent Information Network (NPIN) on the Internet. You will find these guides in the Urban/Minority Families section of the Urban Education Web (UEweb), at http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu. You can reach other sections of the NPIN Web through UEweb or at http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/npin/npinhome.html. The NPIN Gopher is at ericps.ed.uiuc.edu. Ask someone in your local library, your children's school, or your parent center how to see the information on this network.

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